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Tainted lakefront site gets cleanup: Contamination a big obstacle to DuSable Park

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More than 15 years after community groups started fighting for a park on a neglected patch of land beside Lake Michigan, a major obstacle--radioactive thorium in the ground--has nearly been removed.

It proved to be not much of a problem, after all.

The thorium, which officials suspect is left over from a nearby gas lantern manufacturing plant, stalled the creation of the park for two years. During the time, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and former property owner Kerr-McGee Corp., wrangled over the cleanup responsibility and the extent of the contamination. In the end, it turned out to be about 10 cubic yards of potentially dangerous dirt--only about enough to fill 75 garbage cans.

"This is pretty low-level contamination, but it's contamination nonetheless," said Fred Micke, the on-scene coordinator for the EPA .

The long sought cleanup of the 3.5 acre site began Thursday and should end Friday, officials said. The contaminated soil will end up in a landfill in Utah.

The site remediation clears the way for the development of DuSable Park, on a peninsula at the mouth of the Chicago River. It is now cut off from the city but was designated a commemorative public space during Harold Washington's administration.

For park advocates, the thorium contamination was just the latest in a series of maddening hurdles in the movement to honor Jean Baptiste Pointe DuSable, a Haitian considered to be Chicago's first non-native settler. Though the park was initially approved in 1988, it languished due to a lack of funds and wasn't resurrected until word spread in 2000 that the Chicago Park District might build a parking lot on the coveted lakefront land.

The secluded meadow was never paved, but several months later, the EPA surveyed the area as part of a general investigation into the Streeterville area where several other sites had been contaminated with thorium, a carcinogen.

EPA officials believe the thorium came from the Lindsay Light Chemical Co., which manufactured incandescent gas mantles for home and street lighting from 1910 until 1933 on East Grand Avenue, before moving to West Chicago. In the 1980s, when the Streeterville area was under development, contaminated dirt was likely dumped on the area that will become DuSable Park.

"Kerr-McGee was not as willing to do the excavation of DuSable as the other properties that were clearly attributable to Lindsay Light," said EPA spokesman Mick Hans. "At the end of the day, it wasn't that much material. They already had some crews nearby and decided they should just do it."

For the groups fighting to restore the park, including Friends of the Parks, the Chicago DuSable League, Friends of DuSable, Ald. Burton Natarus (42nd), the Grant Park Advisory Council, and a dozen others, the cleanup may help realize a long-held dream.

"The cleanup is the first step," said Haroon Rashid, president of Friends of DuSable, which has been pressing for the creation of a city holiday honoring the Chicago pioneer. "Once we get that out of the way, the actual park will be the next battle."

That fight has already begun. The Art Institute of Chicago had tapped renowned sculptor Martin Purveyor to create a statue of DuSable. But the DuSable League was not happy with the abstract design--described by some as a cube with a feather it in--and has called for a more realistic rendition.

Several groups, meanwhile, have made proposals addressing the best way to use the land. The Chicago River Rowing and Paddling Center would like to make the park a center for river activities and sports and would honor DuSable, who arrived by canoe.

Other ideas include a learning center and naturalistic edges to the park, which currently is bordered by a steel lake wall in need of an estimated \$2.5 million in repairs.

PHOTO MAP PHOTO: Environmental workers on Thursday remove toxic thorium from the 3.5 acre lakefront site that will be developed as DuSable Park. Tribune photo by Milbert O. Brown.

MAP: Proposed park. Chicago Tribune.